MACKENZIE RIVER

WITH A MAP

W. F. WENTZEL

26 FEBRUARY, 1821.

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CCOUNT OF MACKENZIE'S RIVER WITH A CHART FROM MR. WENTZELLE. SENT
O HON. SIMON MCGILLVRAY.

Mackenzies river takes its rise at the west end of Great Slave lake and is the largest stream in the Athabasca track from Fort William, its general breadth being one mile and a quarter, except where swells occur, occasioned by large islands, when it increases to three and in some places to about five miles. Its banks which are lofty and formed of different strata of a greyish clay, sand and a kind of loose brown earth intermixed with stone, ascend rather abruptly from the river and are somewhat thinly clothed with trees. But the islands, which are numerous, compensate by affording abundance of fir fit for building houses or any other purposes required by those who visit these parts from motives of speculation and trade. Besides the great reservoir from whence it derives its source, many considerable streams which originate in the Rocky mountains on the south side and from extensive lakes on the north side, contribute to its enlargement in its progress down to the sea. The largest of these is the Mountain river of Sir Alexander ~~McKenzie~~ Mackenzie and known in the country by the name of the Forks or River aux Liard. It is the richest without exception, in large animals and the fur species of all the streams connected with ~~McKenzies~~ mack river. It produces buffaloe, moose deer, the stag, reindeer and mountain goats and sheep, so called on account of their being peculiar to the Rocky mountains. Its principal attraction, however, to the trader, consists in the number of its beaver, black, brown and grizzly bear, lynxes, martins, otters, minks, wolvereenes, black, silver, cross and red foxes and wolves. The climate as it recedes from Mackenzies river towards the south is the same as in Peace river and its soil is rich and luxurious, which is discernable in the number, size and growth of its trees. It appears also to be favourable to the culture of foreign vegetables, for potatoes, turnips, cabbages, radishes, beets, lettuce, carrots, barley and even peas have been known to thrive with little care. From the Forks down to the Fort Good Hope, there are three more tolerably large rivers which discharge themselves into Mackenzies

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iver from the southward; being unexplored, nothing further is known of them than their confluences.

The vegetable and mineral productions of the country are salt, sulphur, and tar springs, coal, flint and rock crystals, white earth, blue and white clay of an oily substance, this last the natives occasionally eat, a sweetroot called by Sir Alexander Mackenzie the liquorice root, ~~XXXX&X~~ wild flax and the nettle. The trees are the birch, sapine and balsam, poplar, cypress, white spruce, larch and the Canada balsam fir. The fruits are the cranberry, rasp, straw, cloud, blue, goose, poir and the magpye berries. A piece of native silver is said to have been brought from Mackenzies river in the year 1796, found in the Rocky mountains up the river aux Liard, which Mr. Roderick Mackenzie took to Montreal and had it made into ear ornaments.

Mountains are common on both sides of the river. Of these the most considerable are the Rocky mountains which run on the south side in a westerly direction at a distance of from twenty to about fifty miles, excepting in two places where they approach the water's edge and in one instance (below Bear Lake river) they are divided by Mackenzies river. The next in magnitude is the Horn mountain, which commences on the north side of the entrance of Mackenzies river and extends as far down as the Forks on the opposite side and then strikes off to the northward and is seen at Martin lake. All kinds of animals are the same on both these ridges except, as observed before, the mountain goat and sheep; buffaloe are seldom seen beyond the beginning of Mackenzies river.

Lakes are innumerable and extensive, particularly on the north side. These most distinguished for size are the Porcupine, Great Willow, Long and lastly the Great Bear lakes, superior in extent to all and supposed to equal lake Superior; it communicates as do also the other lakes by a ~~XXXgable~~ navigable outlet with Mackenzies river and is distant about seventy miles. Its eastern ~~XX~~ extremity is said to approach the Coppermine river within a short distance. It contains few islands and is reported to be very deep; it abounds in fish and its borders are frequented at all seasons of the year by herds of reindeer, to which

be added the musk ox on the east side. Its shores are rocky and
r the most part barren and unattractive, it nevertheless produces
rtins, muskrats, white and red foxes, a few beaver, wolvereenes,
me otters and bears. The west end bordering on Mackenzies river is
ther more liberally supplied with these useful animals, especially
e muskrat, which is in great plenty. This description will answer
r the other inferior lakes on the same side, excepting that no muskox
to be found on their confines as in Great Bear lake. To the south-
rd of Mackenzies river are few or no remarkable lakes for their size;
t if they are smaller they are absolutely much better supplied than
e northern lakes with woods and furnish more occupation and allurements
r the Indian hunter who seeks a country capable of supplying his
nts and affording him the means of purchasing those articles, which
om long habits have become indispensible to his existence such as
on works, kettles, guns and ammunition which he bartered from the
ites with peltries. Rum as an article of trade had no value in their
inion and ought not to be encouraged ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ because it
uld be destructive to both their health and industry.

With respect to different tribes of Indians inhabiting Mackenzies
ver, the first is the Horn Mountain Indians who occupy the whole
rth side as far down as Great Bear lake; they are the principal branch
the Dogrib Indians and amount to about two hundred men and boys
pable of pursuing the chace. These people and, indeed, all the natives
Mackenzies river, with which I am acquainted, are of a peaceable, mild
d inoffensive disposition; hospitable to strangers and among themselves
d generally speaking honest in their dealings. Yet, withal rather
olined to mistake the truth particularly when questioned on the
oductions of their own country, which they always endeavour to
present as poor and unproductive. Such is their love of peace that I
ve known the Red Knives or rather Copper Indians to commit with
punity, the most daring depredations upon them; their wives are often
ken from them and they themselves stripped of everything else useful
valuable. The only instance in which they seem to have exhibited
symptons of cruelty in their nature happened in the year 1815 at

r lake; when a party of five young men including a half breed,
only and outrageously murdered twelve individuals of the Hare Indian
on, who were at the time on their way to the fort. This, however,
d hardly be termed a national act as it was the deed of a few
eless young men provoked and tempted to it by a vicious old woman
offered her daughters as an incitement.

The mode of hunting practised by the Dogrib Indians is similar to
of all other tribes inhabiting Mackenzies river: it consists in
ng a kind of hedge, leaving apertures at certain distances for
ing snares, in which the unwary moose or reindeer is taken. Smaller
als and all kinds of birds and waterfowl are also caught in snares.
snare is made of parchment skin cut up into thongs, a number of
h are twisted together and when dryed, become much stronger than
or rope of equal size; for fowl and small birds sinew is preferred.
ides, they make use of the bow and arrow and gun but not expertly.
ng of an indolent disposition, they prefer living on fish, their
es affording them abundance with little trouble. Nets they make
selves and show some ingenuity in manufacturing the thread from
inner rind of the willow bark, which they spin or rather twist very
e. They make traps for the martin, wolf, wolverene and fox as well
for the beaver, which mode of taking the latter animal is confined
far as my observation extends to Mackenzie river. A method of hunting
reindeer common with the Dogribs is to take the skin of the head
neck and the horns of a young male in one hand and rubbing a bundle
sticks against the horns with the other imitating (and slowly advancing
the same time, some gestures of the animal, they so perfectly deceive
unsuspicious deer, as to get into the midst of a herd without creating
least alarm and destroy them before they can effect their escape.
spend much of their time in amusements
being naturally fond of mirth, singing and dancing afford them the
atest delight, shooting with the bow and arrow is an exercise in which
y take great pleasure and they practise running leaping and ~~wrest~~
stling.

The next nation on the same side of Mackenzie river, is the Hare
dians. They are considerably superior in numbers to the last mentioned
dians, but more inclined to indolence. Their hunting grounds are

ded to the northward by the Squinteyes or Quarrellers and to the
east by the Esquimeaux lands which reach to the sea coast. The
t number of men in this tribe is imperfectly known, as is the interior
their country; nor have we better information with respect to the
int eyed Indians who are neighbours to the Esquimeaux, which occupy
supposed discharge of Mackenzies river with the sea. With the latter
ple we are wholly unacquainted. This completes the number of Indian
bes inhabiting the north side as well as the south side of the lower
ts of Mackenzies river. (The south side, from its entrance to the
ference of river aux Liard or Forks and thence about 200 miles up
s branch, as also some ranges of the Rocky mountains are lands claimed
the Beaver Indians or Strongbows of Sir Alexander Mackenzie, whose
ber may amount to seventy men and boys. This is the nation who
troyed Fort Nelson and murdered Mr. Alexander Henry with his family
all his people in winter 1812-13. Until that unfortunate event
y were deemed the most friendly, hospitable and quiet of all the
bes in Mackenzies river and justly esteemed the best hunters. In
ir manners they are conciliating and sociable and easily governed
mild and just treatment. The next ~~tribe~~ tribe or family is the Rocky
ntain Indians. consisting of about thirty or forty men and boys;
ese form an intermediate race, between the Beaver Indians and Dogribs
are, properly speaking, a mixture of both, although at present
sidered as a distinct people. Their hunting grounds are bounded on
one side by the Mahanny river, a large stream which falls into the
er aux Liard and, on the other, by the Rocky Mountain river that joins
kenzie's river opposite the discharge of the Great Willow lake. These
ple have nearly the same habits, customs, manner and disposition as
se already described and next to the Beaver Indians are the best hunters
wn along Mackenzies river. After these, though separated by a large
ct of country, occasionally visited by the Dogribs and Hare Indians are
Dahadinnes, natives and inhabitants of the Rocky mountains, they are
n sometimes on Mackenzies river; but of these people we possess hardly
knowledge. From the reports of their neighbours the Rocky Mountain
ians, we understand that they are numerous and good hunters, commanding
reat extent of country, comprising the whole breadth of the Rocky mount-
, stretching in length from the Rocky Mountain river down to Fort

d Hope. No attempt, however, has been made to explore them; although
is said that beaver and large animals are abundant in those parts.
have heard that beyond the Rocky mountains a very large river flows
the westward and discharges itself into the sea, on which are two
e strange tribes of Indians, one called the Bearskin nationand the
e of the other I do not remember. That ships come yearly up the
er to a certain distance and trade with the natives, who get a
rt of large dogs or lances made of a kind of soft white iron, in
turn for the skins of the mountain goat, sheep, wolverene, bear and
x, beaver not being enquired after. Returning to the confines of
kenzies river, the next and last nation who resort for trade ~~XXXXX~~
the Company's establishments in that quarter, is the Squint Eyes .
their habits and manners my knowledge is very limited and I believe
y are as imperfectly known to others, excepting Messrs. Charles Grant
Peter Warren Dease, who have traded with them for several successive
rs at Fort Good Hope. Besides these natives we have some confused
counts of two others in the upper part of river aux Liard, inhabiting
Rocky Mountains. The first is the Nahannies and the second said
frequent the upper establishment in Peace river are known to the
kenzies river Indians by the name of Tsilladahodinné. It is probable t
t communications might be opened with all these unknown tribes, for
re are considerable rivers leading to Mackenzies river from all the
ferent parts of the country occupied by them. The names of these
reams beginning by the river aux Liard (the source of which is yet
known) and proceeding down Mackenzies river maybe thus stated in
tation, North branch of river aux Liard, Nahanny river, Rocky Mountain
ver, Dahidinne river and another stream somewhat above Fort Good Hope,
name of which I cannot at present recall to mind. From all parts
the countries, that I have endeavoured to describe herein beaver
other peltries have been obtained while I was in Mackenzies river,
convincing proof how worthy they are of notice in a ~~XXXXXXXX~~ commercial
int of view.

The natives of Mackenzies river dress in the same manner except the
int Eyes, although the materials depend upon the animals which each
rticular country contains; some making use of the moose skin, and

ers of the skin of the reindeer. In winter the hareskin furnishes erclothing for all alike. The capots or shirts of the men are de and long, reaching down to the knees and adorned with several rows fringes fancifully wrought in coloured moose hair and porcupine ills. They gird the waist with a broad belt worked with the same terials, which has a handsome appearance. Their leggings, shoes and vers collars which they wear round the neck are similarly garnished. eir head dress consists of a narrow leather slip surrounding the rehead; bears claws are attached at certain distances to the slips, as to project forward and to their extremities are affixed the feathers an eagles tail, which dance at every motion. A scalping knife case d fire bag fastened to the back between the shoulders with a pair mittens, trimmed as their other garments and suspended from the neck constantly worn by both sexes, a leather blanket is thrown over l and completes the dress. The women deck themselves out in much e same way, only that their leather gowns, or, as the Canadians style em, cotillons, are longer and they bestow on them a great profusion ornament.

The North West company had been in possession of Mackenzies ver nine years, yet had only two posts established, one at the rks and the second at Great Bear lake, till in the year 1804, I was nt back to that department and appointed to the charge of the post at e Forks, where Mr. James Porter had wintered the year before d made a return of 36 packs of furs. The Indians then resorting r trade to the Establishment consisted of the Beaver Indian nation, cky Mountain Indians and a number of Dogribs, amounting in all to out one hundred and ninety men and boys. My outfit was 27 pieces trading goods for which I received 50 packs weighing 87 lbs. each. the course of this winter I had an opportunity of making enquiries the state of the country up the river aux Liard. The information ich I collected on that occasion convinced me of the benefit which ght accrue to the concern, by establishing a post there. Full of ese ideas and without waiting orders from the partners of Athabasca, I nt a man in the summer to erect a temporary store about 80 miles from e Forks and sometime afterwards followed myself with an Indian in a all canoe to ascertain whether the river would be navigable for large noes;

n which I was not disappointed, but rather more firmly persuaded of
superior advantages for trade. Therefore, I divided the Beaver
ians from the ~~XX~~ other tribes who traded with me at the Forks and
t them up the river aux Liard to collect provisions promising that
ould write to the partners at Fort Chipewean and solicit for them a
manent establishment, which I did in a general letter explaining as
l as I could my motives for so doing, setting forth at the same time
promising appearance of the place. I added that I would proceed
self, if a clerk was sent to superintend their affairs at the Forks.
Alexander Mackenzie supported my suggestions and accordingly Mr.
orge Keith was sent there, while I remained at the Forks. The
ceeding year we made each thirty packs and the year following we had
2 between us; three fourths of which were beaver, so that the same
dians who gave 36 packs 3 years before had now more than trebled their
turn. At this period Mr. Alexander Mackenzie having opened a trade
th the Squint Eyes, the aggregate of the returns of ~~MX~~ Mackenzies
ver doubled its former ratio. The product of each post stood thus,
new establishment called Fort Nelson 72 packs, Forks 40, Great Bear
ke 23 and Fort Good Hope upwards of 40, forming in all more than 170
cks of furs, three fourths of which consisted of beaver skins. The
tablishment of the whole department employed a partner as manager.
ur clerks and 27 men or Canadians. And its outfit if my memory does
t betray me, did not exceed 112 pieces including equipments, orders
d stores for clerks and engagées remaining inland and the necessary
ovisions to five canoes, for a voyage of fifteen and twenty days. This
osperous situation of the ~~XXXXXX~~ company's affairs did not, however,
ntinue long, a reverse soon followed the causes of which are too
inful to relate; besides it might be considered as invidious in me to
capitulate the particulars when the remedy is too late to recall the
il. Suffice it to say that the most erroneous system of conduct on
e part of some of the managers of Mackenzies river, materially
ntributed not only to the ruin of the trade, but the destruction of many
the company's useful servants; leaving the natives impressed with
lively contempt for our morals and rectitude of character. Finally,
judicious management brought on the destruction and massacre of Fort
lson which gave the conclusive blow to the trade; for in the year 1815

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the collective number of packs amounted to no more than 64. By this time the concern conceiving the department incapable of defraying its expenses ordered it to be evacuated altogether, which was accordingly done in the summer, 1815 to the great hazard of our lives, for the natives having obtained a knowledge of our intentions, had formed the design of destroying us on our way out.

Notwith standing that no promises had been made of returning at a future period to trade with them, I was sent the following summer with six Canadians in a large canoe and a small supply of goods to renew the intercourse. In the course of my passage down the river as far as Fort Good Hope, I fell in with several parties of all the different tribes and was welcomed by them with extravagant demonstrations of joy. They danced and cried by turns, rushing up to their knees into the water to pull my canoe ashore, begging, at the same time, that the whites would return to their lands and promising them utmost endeavour to render our situation with them as comfortable as possible. I explained to them that it did not depend upon myself, but on the partners at Fort Chipewean, to whom I undertook to make a report of their request and advised them to hunt furs and prepare provisions in the expectation that it would be granted; I also assured them that if we did not resume our deserted establishments, a canoe would certainly go down every year to trade their furs and bring them the most useful supplies. This pacified them and they agreed to exert themselves in collecting peltries. To the chiefs of bands that were absent I likewise sent presents and appropriate messages. My conduct was approved by the partners assembled in the fall at Fort Chepewean and the good effects of this journey appeared the succeeding years; for in consequence of my representation Mr. Charles Grant was sent to reestablish the department and traded in his journey down 40 packs, whereas I had collected eight only the year before. The company have now three posts in that quarter, viz; Fort Good Hope, Willow Lake river and Fort Nelson reoccupied last year. These establishments are committed to the care of one partner and three clerks most of whom are deficient in knowledge of the country and its natives.

I will now venture to give my opinion on the best manner of re-establishing the prosperity of trade in Mackenzies river. A manager that is known to the natives, of an upright, steady and affable disposition should be appointed (for three years at least) to remain there, for the natives dislike changes. I shall take the liberty of observing that Mr. Keith is the only person as qualified with whom they are acquainted. It is necessary that the clerks entrusted with the several posts should be men of similar character: otherwise the best measures of the manager would be defeated and the strictest subordination must absolutely be exercised with regard to the men or Canadians. In summer the clerks should not be allowed to leave their trusts on whimsical pretences and visit Fort Chepewean, leaving their posts to the care of ignorant, lustful Canadians. If any from ill-health or other urgent reasons wishes to retire from the department, they might give previous notice of their intention to the concern, which should provide against injuries arising to the trade therefrom by sending another clerk a year before to winter with the retiring one, so that he would have an opportunity of becoming acquainted with the habits of the natives; by such a precaution the change would be hardly perceptible to them. Besides all innovations in the mode of trafficking and treatment of them should be forbidden, unless it was fully proved that improvement could thereby be made. Even then the measures proposed should be slowly adopted and the trader must first possess their confidence. Such uniform conduct would destroy all suspicions in the breast of the Indian and encourage him to industry. The posts also should not be encumbered with more than one or two families, that they may not be exposed to privation.

It is scarcely necessary for me to point out after the remarks which I have already made, the great additional advantages that might be derived from examining the countries about the Rocky Mountains and establishing an intercourse with the natives; they would in all probability render Mackenzie river a source of wealth to the company much above their estimation and of which it is unlikely that any opponent can partake.

To conclude I shall observe that the foregoing sheets were written from memory while I was at the Expedition House near to Coppermine river, therefore it is likely that some errors may have occurred, which I hope

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will be deemed excusable, when it is considered that I had no documents to which I could refer for a more exact statement.

WILLARD FERDINAND WENTZEL.

February 26th, 1821,

Winter Lake, Fort Enterprise.

according to Sir Alex.r Mackenzie
Squawk tiger Indians of
Sir Alex.r Mackenzie
Beaver Skin Indians
Dog Rib Indians
a Scale of 100 Geographical Miles.
This sheet is rather shetch of the country adjacent to Great Slave Lake, has been constructed from such particulars as my memory could furnish of the lengths & courses of the canoe &c. — Those portions of which are filled thus ..... are protracted upon the information which I have gained from Indians, and are such I have therefore distinguished them from the rest, for I cannot vouch for their accuracy. — D. T. Smith
Copied from Thos. Drummond's Sketch in Sir John Ross's Chart
Feb.y 20th 1829